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SOCIO-RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR

RITES OF PASSAGE

BIRTHDAYS AND BAPTISM

In the traditional culture of the Middle East (urban, village, or nomad), the status of midwife is a very important one. Midwives are invariably local women past menopause, and men are rigidly excluded from the house while the birth is taking place (cf. Granqvist, 1947, pp. 36-40).

Only one villager was born during the period of study, and the event took place in Beirut (the family is in the Sunnite Reishoni category) some time before the writer learned of it. The majority of Mtoufi's housewives of childbearing age live in the city most of the year, and for the most part they closely prefer the services of physicians and hospitals in important medical matters.

Once born, the modern village infant, judging from the very few cases observed, spends his time in a crib and is not swaddled consistently. After the first few weeks, he may be fed from a modern nursing bottle. Factory-made toys are not very common in Lebanon, but small cars and trucks and at least one tricycle were observed in the village.

Birthday anniversaries are celebrated in a few families. There is a cake with candles, and the whole affair is new, probably inspired by experiences in American boarding schools.

Baptism is performed anywhere from forty days to about two years after the birth of the child. It appeared that the mode tended toward the latter age. The ritual is accompanied by at least a family party, but in some cases, according to one informant, the baptismal party may approach a wedding party in size.

ENGAGEMENT AND MARRIAGE

Engagement. Engagement (*khutbi*) is a more or less formal status. Quite often the couple simply declare themselves engaged, with the tacit approval of the priest. If both parties are members of the village, the priest's only official concern is that they are more distantly related than first cousin. If they are from [illegible] it is his duty to inform them that he will be unable to marry them. In any case, the couple may or may not come to the priest for his blessing. Wedding rings (plain gold bands) are worn by both parties on the right hand to signify engagement. At the marriage ceremony, they are transferred to the left. Engagement rings may be worn when there is any time, and no questions are asked. Young

...ers who are not engaged are opposed to be, in one way or other, disapproved, either by elders or by the pressure of people their own age. Similar attitudes and behavior have been reported from the Jordanian town of Ramallah which is comparable to Mount in a number of important respects, although it is far larger (Zureik, 1995, p. 417).

It was quite clear that there is no formal mechanism for parental arrangement of marriage. One older person said, "It only matters that they love each other." Parents obviously are not disinterested in the matter, however, and their violent disapproval would certainly provoke a family crisis, but it is doubtful that it could prevent the couple from being married if they really were determined. Nevertheless, it is expected that the man will formally request the girl's father's approval before the matter proceeds. The traditional culture provides an escape for couples who face severe family disapproval. This is equivalent to elopement, and it occurs periodically at the present time. Generally, the prospective groom, with the help of friends, secretly removes the girl from the village. He then returns to the village to attempt negotiations, through an intermediary, with her family. All attempts are made to gain his approval, but if they fail, the wedding is likely to go ahead anyway. The ceremony cannot be performed in the church, or, of course, in the bride's house, but it may take place at the groom's house, and this is entirely at variance with the ordinary practice which is embodied in the notion: "The woman may not come into the man's house until after they are married." The full wedding ceremony symbolizes this concept quite vividly. Marriages by elopement are nothing new, and they are perfectly legal, but tradition has involved disadvantages: the strain of bad feelings in the family, absence of the fun of the full ceremony, and, probably, fewer presents.

The bride price (*mahr* or *wajh*) is still negotiated for among Muslims. It was asked about by some in Mount, and the informants, who knew what it was, said that they did not have it now and thought that they had never had it in the village. Chbeeb (1913–16, p. 317) and Sell (1917–18, p. 137) report the bride price among Moslems elsewhere, but this does not necessarily weaken the possibility of the validity of the historical connection of the Mountains. On the other hand, Miss Zureik (1979, p. 416) says that the bride price was given up only recently in predominantly Greek Orthodox Ramallah. As far as could be ascertained, the couple receive presents—emphasizing household equipment—in equal measure from both families and from friends.

So far, it would appear that matches are made by the mutual free choice of the parties concerned, and that this is not a new practice. We would be in serious error, however, if we confirmed such an impression without qualification. Choice is free, but within the restricted compass of village membership. Exogamous marriages do occur, but they involve doubts, difficulties, and lasting consequences which cannot be taken lightly. (This will be discussed further in the chapter, "Kinship Structure and Marriage Patterns.")